

9-1996

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Recommended Citation

Eng, P., Indochinese journalists learn how to report on market economy, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 1, 1996, 84-89.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss1/9>

Indochinese Journalists Learn How To Report On Market Economy

Peter Eng

Associated Press, Bangkok

The legacy of journalists who died covering the Vietnam War lives on in the work of the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation, ¹ which trains a new generation of journalists now covering the complex issues of national reconstruction.

In May, the IMMF conducted an intensive three-week course on business and economic reporting for 15 print, radio and television journalists from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Its next course, in October, will center on another rising concern of governments, citizens and the news media throughout Asia -- the environment and its degradation.

The IMMF was founded in 1991 by British photojournalist, Tim Page, to commemorate more than 350 journalists killed in Indochina. With start-up money provided by the Asia Foundation, the non-profit group was set up in Thailand. It conducted its first training course in basic journalism in May 1994. IMMF operates on a bare-bones budget and depends on outside sponsors for each of its courses. The teachers are paid, as are one full-time project director and one part-time assistant; otherwise all the work is done voluntarily by Western journalists based in Bangkok.

Just like the environmental course, the business reporting course was organized to meet the needs of the Indochinese media. Throughout East Asia, where the locomotives of economic growth are roaring toward the dawn of the Pacific Century, no area of the media is expanding more rapidly than business and economic journalism. There are new business programs on commercial, cable and satellite television, new business magazines and daily newspapers, business capsule updates on the radio, fax machine, and computer terminal. In the general news media, business sections are being expanded and improved.

Even in Indochinese countries where the media are tightly controlled, business-oriented publications have flourished. They've often been the boldest media to expose social and economic problems and corruption among officials. In Vietnam,

senior government officials have been jailed following media exposures of embezzlement.

However, there are limits to investigative business reporting in Indochina. Journalism teachers often have to think twice before urging students from Indochina to go dig up some more dirt. In July, for example, the Vietnamese government said it would prosecute three state-run newspapers for reports that alleged the civil aviation department had incurred heavy losses in airplane purchases and that the state oil company had made too many concessions to an Australian oil company. The media were accused of disclosing state secrets, a charge that carries prison terms of up to 15 years.

"We organized the business course because editors in Indochina have been telling us that all these economic changes are so new to their reporters, and they need all the training they can get," said IMMF co-president Denis D. Gray, of the Associated Press bureau in Bangkok.

The Japan Foundation and the Ford Foundation provided the principal funding for the course. The curriculum was tailored to the specific interests of the students, who came from both state and privately-owned media. The teachers were Paul Ryan from the Knight Foundation of the United States, and Geoff Murray from the Thomson Foundation of Britain. The course had four major goals: (1) to refresh skills in basic journalism; (2) to improve overall writing skills; (3) to inform the students about business and economic practices relating to Indochina; (4) to strengthen the bonds among the journalists from different countries.

"We had only three weeks to learn, but our whole life to practise," said one of the students, Col. Nguyen Le Phuc, chief sub-editor of the official Vietnamese army newspaper, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*. "Now we know what is 'money in,' and what is 'money out,' what is supply and what is demand," he said at the graduation ceremony held at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand. "Now we know that in every lead of a story, we have to write less than 30 words."

In written evaluations, the students rated the course highly, but some said the curriculum was too tight and crowded with too many guest speakers (there were 25) -- an indication the students had problems following the material. IMMF has decided to reduce the number of speakers in future courses, and allow more time for reviewing the main points in guest lectures and for improving writing skills.

IMMF courses are taught in English without translators. Many of the students are not very fluent in English. (For its courses,

the IMMF can select students from among applicants in Cambodia, but must take officially-nominated students from Vietnam and Laos). The question of how much attention to devote to writing exercises has been debated within the IMMF. Some journalism teachers say it is time-consuming, and not much progress can be made in three weeks. Others say experience elsewhere proves significant progress is possible, not only in improving writing skills as such but at the same time in enhancing understanding and retention of classroom lectures and field trips.

The business reporting course began with classes held at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. The students first reviewed the basic principles of all reporting, starting with "What is news?" and running through the lead, the inverted pyramid, hard news vs. features, sourcing, attribution and use of quotes. Then they learned the basics of business reporting, including evaluation of company annual reports; understanding foreign exchanges, stock exchanges and commodity trading; and accessing computer information sources.

Murray, who covered the Vietnam War for Reuters and is soon to publish his fifth book on business in Asia, said he tried to keep his presentations down-to-earth and digestible.

"To make sure the classes were not too technical and the students understood, I spent a lot of time trying to reduce things down to the real basics -- money in, money out, supply and demand, price up, price down -- and relate it to the everyday lives of the students," Murray said.

"Most of them had had no experience with business or finance in any shape or form, so apart from the fact that the lectures were in a foreign language, there was also the problem of the foreignness of the jargon being used."

Guest speakers including top businessmen and government officials discussed such topics as the economic development of countries through which the Mekong River flows; the cultural and political resistance that foreign businesses face in some Indochinese countries; the problems of plans to develop Cambodia's Angkor temples for tourism; and the damage that inaccurate reporting does to the image of a multinational corporation.

In Bangkok, the journalists visited the Stock Exchange of Thailand, the securities firm Jardine Fleming, the Bangkok Bank, the Reuters financial wire service, the Population Development Association, and the American Chamber of Commerce. A one-

week field trip to Thailand's Eastern Seaboard gave the students a first-hand look at the benefits as well as the problems of rapid industrialization. At the seaside town of Pattaya, they saw how pollution, uncontrolled development and crime can quickly drive tourists away from a once-bustling resort, as well as hurt the health and living conditions of local residents.

Then the students toured the huge industrial estates at Maptha Phut and Leam Chabang, where they marvelled at super-modern television, automotive supply, and other manufacturing plants. For several of them, it was the highlight of the course.

The writing exercises were published as the IMMF Times, a 10-page newspaper. Each article was jointly written by two students of different nationalities, which reflected the IMMF's goal of increasing understanding and cooperation among journalists of Indochina. Their countries have been in armed conflict and ethnic hostility in recent years.

One student suggested that journalists from Burma be included in future IMMF courses, an idea which the IMMF is exploring. As in Vietnam and Laos (and until very recently in Cambodia), the news media are almost all government-run and tightly controlled in Burma.

A few of the students in the business course worked for business news organizations, including the *Saigon Economic Times* and the *Vietnam Investment Review*. But most did only political or social news for such organizations as *The Cambodia Daily* and the state-run *Lao National Radio*.

"More and more we're informing our readers about economic problems, not just military news," said Col. Phuc of the Vietnamese army newspaper. "All Vietnamese media are increasing their economic coverage. In the wartime it was war news, but now we are reconstructing. We have no experience covering news about business, especially the market economy. So we want to learn from the experiences of other countries."

Phuc said his paper already devoted half its space to economic news, and he planned not only to write more business stories himself but also urge the paper to increase economics coverage in general, and also encourage punchier stories. He said: "Often in a Vietnamese newspaper, you'll see a very long story, but there's very little information. We need shorter story and more information."

Vichitsavanh Chantery, an announcer for the English-language news service of *Lao National Radio*, said the free market

"is all very new for our country, so we need to learn. We don't have a stock market, as you know, but now everything is business. The government's economic policy is to have dealings with other countries, and it is sending people abroad for training".

Another student was Moen Chhoen Nariddh, a teacher at the Cambodia Communication Institute, which conducts workshops for journalists in Phnom Penh. There's plenty of business stories in Phnom Penh, Nariddh said, some of them not readily obvious. For example, he said, shoeshine boys are appearing on the streets for the first time. Before everyone wore plastic sandals but with greater prosperity and the introduction of Western-style fashions, leather shoes are now preferred.

It was the second IMMF course for Nariddh. He had attended the IMMF's very first course, in 1994, and has been sharing what he learned with students at the communication institute. "Now I plan to also conduct a business reporting course," Nariddh says.

The environmental reporting course, funded by the Swedish government, to be conducted in October will focus on marine and coastal issues. It will be the IMMF's second environmental course. The first one, in October 1995, focused on forestry, logging, energy and land issues and took the students to the hills and forests of northern Thailand.

The course comprises two weeks of classroom instruction and a one-week field trip to coastal areas of southern Thailand, where the students will visit fishing villages, prawn farms and mangrove rehabilitation projects, and interview community leaders about environmental pollution and degradation. They will learn to grapple with the often-complex issues in environmental reporting.

In Thailand, prawn farming, for example, is often environmentally destructive but it is also highly lucrative. One scheme unscrupulous land developers have used to acquire state land is to encourage poor people to encroach on it. After the land is occupied, they buy the plots from the migrants and set up prawn farms. In this way, mangrove forests are destroyed.

IMMF says that just as the business course will help journalists play a role in economic development in Indochina, the environmental course will help them work to ensure that natural resources are protected in the course of development. Thailand is an ideal location for the course because it serves as both a warning and example to Indochina. Thailand's environmental

degradation is at an advanced stage, partly due to rapid economic growth. At the same time, government agencies and academic and civic groups are active and innovative in attempts to curtail the damage, and the news media have taken up the cause.

Notes

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